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ABSTRACT

Development of theories concerning social identity and language learning is explored, and ways in which English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers can support students in this process are discussed. During the 1980s and 1990s, emphasis in research on language learning shifted to its social context. Theorists have begun to find the focus on motivation to be inadequate in addressing how language and social context are related, and the concept of investment in the target language has emerged as a complement to motivation theories, by helping explain the complex dynamic relationship between the learner and the social world. Further research in this vein, particularly concerning immigrants learning English, has looked at re-creation of individual identity through discourse. Teachers can support the process of identity re-creation in the classroom using a variety of techniques, including individual student portfolio writing, dialogue journal writing, large-group discussion, small-group conversations, improvisational dialogues, and bringing public discourse into the classroom setting through discussion of news reports and articles on immigration. These can help learners become more conscious of the process of change in their lives and give them means for participation. (Contains 16 references). (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Social Identity and the Adult ESL Classroom

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Social identity can be seen as the various ways in which people understand themselves in relation to others, and how they view their past and their future (Peirce, 1995). The act of immigrating to a new country can profoundly affect a person's social identity. In fact, some people experience this change more as an act of re-creation than as a temporary process of readjustment. For example, it might necessitate re-creating one's parental role because one's child can more quickly acquire the new language and perform tasks such as talking with a landlord or paying bills (Weinstein-Shr, 1995). It might mean a shift in one's collective identity, so that being from the coastal village of Bucáy in Ecuador is overshadowed by becoming or being seen as Latin American (Rouse, 1995). These transformations are complex and continual, redefining all aspects of self along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, ability or disability, and so on. Although many teachers working with adults learning English as a second language (ESL) will find that issues of social identity are familiar strands of classroom conversation, most educators do not address this issue overtly in the classroom.

This digest will explore how theories of social identity and language learning have developed and discuss ways in which teachers might support students in the process of self re-creation, with the ultimate goal of making language learning more effective.

Evolution of Second-Language Acquisition Theory

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, theorists of second language acquisition (SLA) and practitioners of ESL tended to see language learning in terms of the formal qualities of language (Corder, 1974). Theoretical discussions about the meanings of particular errors, the order in which learners acquire certain grammatical forms, and the phenomena of interlanguage translated into a focus on grammar and pronunciation in the classroom.

By the 1980s and 1990s, discussions shifted from language itself to learning processes and learning styles (Cohen and Aphek, 1981; Oxford, 1990). Taxonomies of learning strategies were developed (Oxford, 1990) that helped teachers to individualize instruction, but that also held the danger of reducing learners to the style profile commonly associated with their ethnic group (McCarty, 1991). However, this research laid a foundation for the next development in the field: an emphasis on the social context of language learning.

Social Identity and Language Learning

Recently, researchers (McKay & Wong, 1996; Peirce, 1995) have questioned the way in which SLA theorists have understood the language learner's relationship to the social world. Peirce (1995) asks why learners communicate successfully in some situations, while in others they falter or remain silent. Rejecting the idea that this can be sufficiently explained by personality traits such as introversion and extroversion or by a lack of motivation, Peirce argues that a learner's ability to speak is also affected by relations of power between speakers. Structural inequalities such as racism, sexism, and classism can limit learners' exposure to English as well as their opportunities to practice it (Spolsky, 1989).

Peirce (1995) also questions the concepts of instrumental and integrative motivation that have been especially influential (Gardner and Lambert, 1972) in the field of second-language acquisition. Peirce believes that instrumental motivation (learning a language for a specific reason, such as seeking employment) and integrative motivation (learning a language to become part of a particular community) fall short indescribing the language learner's situation because they assume a static identity and a singular desire on the part of the language learner.

In order to better represent human complexity and account for the ambivalence that learners sometimes feel in the process of language learning, she suggests that the concept of *investment in the target language* may be a useful complement to theories of motivation. Whereas motivation is understood as an aspect of the language learner, investment describes the complex dynamic relationship between the learner and the social world. In her study of immigrant women learning English in Canada, Peirce (1995) found that the women sometimes had ambivalent feelings about speaking English. This hesitation seemed to come from their resistance to the identities others were creating for them, not from a lack of motivation. For example, one woman avoided talking with native speakers of English because she did not want to be identified as an immigrant, an identity that she understood to have negative connotations. Another learner, a middle-aged woman working with native-speaking teenagers in a fast-food restaurant, chose to confront similar barriers to her use of English by "claim[ing] her right to speak" (p.23). Because of her difficulties in speaking English, her co-workers forced her to do more than her share of the work. When they told her to clean up even though they had nothing to do, she positioned herself as a parent and them as children. This allowed her to assume more power in the conversation and to get more equitable treatment.

Multiple Discourses

Sandra Lee McKay and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong (1996) have built on Peirce's work with their study of Chinese-speaking high school students in an ESL program in California. They observed that not only were learners establishing their changing identities within specific conversations, but that there were multiple discourses, or larger conversations (in society as a whole), that also affected their identities. These included images of Asians as model minorities (industrious, uncomplaining, academically successful) in contrast with views of other minority groups, such as Latin

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Americans, as inferior and contrary (what McKay and Wong call the "colonialist/racialized discourse" (p.583)). McKay and Wong emphasize the role of power in all conversations involving immigrants, from personal interactions to national, societal debates. When immigrant learners talk about their aspirations in the United States, the teacher's response and their classmates' responses, along with their own words, are important parts of their self-recreation. If someone yells, "Illegals go home!" on the way to class, this too becomes part of the conversation. And it is this complex, changing self that learners bring to the ESL classroom.

Classroom Applications

"To study identity," writes Victoria Muñoz (1995), "means to explore *the story of identity*–the narrative of identity–the way we tell ourselves and others who we are, where we came from, and where we are going" (p. 46). Teachers can try to support this complex process in a variety of ways.

Portfolio Writing: Eliciting learners' personal stories both orally through the language experience approach (Taylor, 1992) and in writing is a good first step. And because identities are multiple and dynamic, it may be helpful to elicit these stories time and again, focusing on different aspects of identity throughout a class, encouraging learners to build portfolios of their own writings so that they can consider their shifts in identity over time (Peirce, 1995). The texts *Collaborations: English in Our Lives* (Huizenga & Weinstein-Shr,1996) and *Stories to Tell Our Children* (Weinstein-Shr, 1992) offer starting places for this kind of work.

Dialogue Journal Writing: Dialogue journals (Peyton, 1995) can also help learners explore issues of identity. In-class writing about a particular topic (work issues, for example), can be shared with a classmate or the teacher. Learners may find that different aspects of their identities emerge when they are writing with a classmate as opposed to the teacher, or that they can explore a certain topic better with one classmate than another.

Large-Group Discussions: Another way to explore identity construction is to talk about what it means to be a student or a teacher in one's native country and in this particular classroom. This discussion can highlight the process of re-creation. Returning to this theme throughout the course can help learners see the ways in which these ideas are changing. Teachers can facilitate this process by mentioning their own changes as teachers over time. These conversations about classroom identities can be springboards to exploring other aspects of self. *Making Meaning, Making Change* (Auerbach, 1992) is a good resource for this kind of discussion.

Small-Group Conversations: A photograph from one's native country or a meaningful object can be the impetus for small group or pair discussions. Teachers might participate in these groups from time to time, discussing their own evolving identities as descendants of immigrants, or as immigrants themselves. These discussions acknowledge the wealth and variety of learners' past experience while providing a way to start talking about the future.

Improvisational Dialogues: These exercises can begin with brainstorming a list of language strategies for being heard, such as "Wait a minute" or "Listen." Then, the teacher can elicit four or six lines of a dialogue based on learners' experiences of conversations in which they felt they were not listened to. Pairs of students can use the dialogue as a starting place, improvising the rest of the conversation and finding ways to make themselves heard.

Bringing Larger Discourses into the Classroom: What are some U.S. perspectives about immigration? Listening to news reports and reading articles about public attitudes toward immigrants, for example, can facilitate the development of critical thinking skills and help learners to see some of the ways the larger culture perceives this aspect of their identities. This can help learners to better understand the outside pressures on their sense of self.

Conclusion

This rather subtle shifting of the classroom spotlight onto identity can help learners become more conscious of the process of change that is preeminent in many of their lives. It can give them tools to find ways to be heard and help them learn how to participate more fully both in the classroom and in the world outside the classroom.

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